



# KRESS

## **The Campus Art Museum: A Qualitative Study**

### I. Effects and Influences of the Great Kress “Giveaway”

A Report to the The Samuel H. Kress Foundation

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Cover image:  
*The Changing of Water into Wine*, c.1480-1488,  
Workshop of Fernando Gallego, Samuel H. Kress  
Collection, University of Arizona Museum of Art,  
University of Arizona



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## Effects and Influences of the Great Kress “Giveaway”

*“Never in the history of art collecting has so much been owed by so many to so few.”*

*Burlington Magazine editorial*

Climbing stairs to the second floor of the campus art museum, I followed a group of high school students, a parent chaperon, and museum docent into the large rectangular room filled mostly with Renaissance and Baroque art from the Kress Collection. I was curious how these teenagers from a small rural town about forty-five minutes away would interact with religious and mythological works created centuries earlier. A skinny young man in black jeans and cowboy hat lagged behind. Two girls giggled, engaged in their own conversation. The docent was a middle-aged man and had obviously done tours with high school students before. He staked out a place before a painting, waited until most had gathered, gazed up at the work and asked, “What do you see?” “Half-naked people,” replied a boy. His classmates laughed. “Yes,” responded the docent. “What else?” “Angels,” said someone. “Fire” replied someone else. Soon all were looking intently at the painting, trying to name something that hadn’t yet been mentioned. After they had listed a number of items, the docent asked, “What has the artist done to portray heaven and hell?” The students had no problem in answering, pointing out things like the angels in heaven and contorted faces of pain in hell. He asked about associated colors and directions (heaven was up; hell, down), then commented on how skilled the students were at “reading” the painting and how they were reading it in much the same way as people 500 years before had done, how we continue to use many of the same images today to mean much the same things as they had meant so long ago.

The docent shifted the group to a painting of Venus and Adonis. He told well the love story involving a goddess and a mortal, courtship and death. The students’ attention captured, he went on to talk about how Christianity changed views of the mythological world and, in the process, introduced the students to how art can reflect society, its beliefs and values.

We moved on to a Madonna and Child painting. The docent began with his usual question, “What’s going on here?” The students, perhaps hoping for another love story, were paying attention but didn’t have much to offer in response: “A woman holding a child.” “The Virgin Mary and Jesus.” “Why,” asked the docent, “does the baby Jesus in this picture look so buff?” Someone guessed, “because babies are chubby.” The docent laughed and said, “Well, probably more because the artists at this time were influenced by Michelangelo and he made everyone look buff.” He talked more about Michelangelo and the impact of master artists and then commented, “We get to see these paintings, but through them we get to look back in time and see how people thought.”

As the group was shepherded into another gallery, I asked a docent whether, from her experience, teenagers usually got as engaged with the art as this group had. She replied that doing tours with children and teens was usually easier than with adults because adults feared they would say something “wrong.” She stated that the docents generally liked working with the Renaissance and Baroque Gallery



because although “there’s so much variety and change in the museum, the core, the Kress Collection, stays the same.” It was their “anchor,” something they could count on and knew how to use.



Figure 1.1. *Venus Lamenting the Death of Adonis*, Domenico Tintoretto, c.1580-1590, Samuel H. Kress Collection, University of Arizona Museum of Art, University of Arizona

This paper explores the ways in which the Kress works have been used by, and are meaningful for, people across the country.

## Introduction to The Great Kress Giveaway<sup>1</sup>

As a result of success with five and ten cent stores in the early 1900s, Samuel Kress (1863-1955), began to collect art from the thirteenth through early nineteenth centuries, with a focus on the Italian Renaissance (Perry 1994). He made his first art donation to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1927, and then, two years later, established the Samuel H. Kress Foundation to make his collection—almost 3,000 objects, including nearly 1,400 Old Master paintings—more available to the public (Perry 1994, 14). When the National Gallery of Art was formed in 1941, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation donated more than 400 Italian paintings and sculptures (Perry 1994, 25). After Kress died in 1955, the foundation continued his work of making the collection accessible through art donations across the country, particularly in areas that had supported the S.H. Kress and Company Five and Ten Cent Stores. This generous bequest of art, which mostly took place during the late 1950s and early 1960s, included donations to eighteen regional art galleries and twenty-three

1. The phrase “The Great Kress Giveaway” was the title of an article in *Life* magazine, November 16, 1953.

college and university art museums (*History of the Kress Collection* n.d.). As stated in a 1962 *Burlington Magazine* editorial, “Never in the history of art collecting has so much been owed by so many to so few” (279).

The gifting to college and university art museums was known as the *Kress Study Collection Program*. More than 200 paintings—many of them old masters, sculptures, and other objects—were bestowed upon college campuses across the United States (Maser, Giacomini, LaPlante, 1962). These works were specifically selected and distributed to form complementary groups of paintings and sculpture for university or college art museums already in existence or to provide the nucleus for the development of an art collection in those where there was none, but where there already was an active teaching program in the arts, particularly in the history of art. This last stipulation was to insure that the gift would really be one made for the purposes of study, for “use”... (Maser, Giacomini, LaPlante, 1962, 177) The explicit intention was that the objects donated by the Kress Foundation be studied, examined, and critiqued.

In 1962, soon after much of the Kress Study Collection was distributed, an editorial in *The Burlington Magazine*, posed the question: “One would like to know what the drug-store assistants of El Paso (Texas), Birmingham (Alabama), Columbia (South Carolina), or Hawaii (Honolulu) make of their Bellotto, their Paris Bordone, their Magnasco, or their Salviati portrait. It is a pity that no real attempt [has been] made... to assess the effect on the American people, outside the great centres, of this revolutionary experiment....” (279)

One of the intentions of the current study is to learn, fifty years after the *Great Kress Giveaway*, how the works of art distributed to colleges and universities have been used and what difference, if any, the gifts have made for the museums, students, faculty, and communities where they were bestowed.

Figure 1.2. *View on a Canal*, Bernardo Bellotto, c.1740, Samuel H. Kress Collection, Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame



## Study Participants and Methods<sup>2</sup>

The following table shows the campus art museums participating in the study, the year in which each museum was established, the numbers of objects<sup>3</sup> in each museum’s collection, and the number of Kress works donated. Dates of establishment spanned 1917 to 1974 and the size of collections ranged from 3,000 to 30,000 objects. Some museums are part of public institutions, others, private; some in rural areas, others in large cities. The Kress Foundation donated its works to a wide variety of campus art museums.

The number of paintings and other items given to these art museums by the Kress Foundation was generous. One might ask, however, what difference fourteen paintings could make in a collection of 30,000 objects, or even in a collection of 7,000 items? More informative than the number of items in the collection might be the number of objects each museum keeps on permanent view. Almost all of the Kress works are on permanent display, while many of the other items in the museums’ collections rotate in and out with changing exhibitions. The basic question—what difference could these gifts make—remains and is the focus of this report.

**Table 1.1. Study Museums, Establishment Dates, and Numbers of Works in the Kress Collections**

<b>Campus Art Museum</b>	<b>Year Museum was Established</b>	<b>Objects in Collection*</b>	<b>Number of Kress Works</b>
Allen Memorial Art Museum (AMAM) Oberlin College	1917	14,000	10 paintings
Snite Museum of Art (Snite) University of Notre Dame	1942	19,000	17 paintings 1 sculpture
Indiana University of Art (IUAM) Indiana University	1941	30,000	14 paintings
David and Alfred Smart Museum (Smart) University of Chicago	1974	12,000	16 paintings 3 sculptures 3 decorative arts
Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri	1957	13,000	14 paintings
University of Arizona Museum of Art (UAMA) University of Arizona	1955	5,800	60 paintings 4 sculptures
Spencer Museum of Art (Spencer) University of Kansas	1928	38,000	14 paintings 1 sculpture

\* Numbers of objects in collections are rounded off to the nearest hundred.

During visits to campus art museums, I asked interviewees if they had interacted with the Kress objects in any way and, if so, I probed into the nature of those interactions and perspectives on the overall influence of the gifts. The people who spoke most readily about the Kress donations included museum directors

2. The site selection process involved “extreme case” sampling in that we asked campus art museums which had received Kress Collections (twenty-three) to self-identify as *exemplary* of what campus art museums at their best could be, and to submit evidence if interested in participating in the study. With the resulting pool of those museums that we also perceived as *exemplary* based on supporting documents (11), we used maximum variation sampling to select cases that varied widely on indicators such as private/public institutions, large/small campus populations, rural/urban locations, and recipient or not of the Mellon Foundation’s College and University Art Museum Program multi-year grant.

3. Objects in a museum refer to paintings, prints, manuscripts, sculptures, ceramics, glass, coins, jewelry, furniture, fabrics, masks, and all other items that a museum might acquire.

and staff, docents, art history professors, and students studying art history or working in the museum. Professors in other disciplines sometimes were aware of the works and had used them in their classes. Others did not know the works as *Kress donations*, but had sometimes used them in class assignments. The following account is informed by responses of nearly fifty people from seven institutions.

Given that I was working for the Kress Foundation, one might assume that people would give positive responses about the collection.<sup>4</sup> They did. I was able to document evidence, however, that backed up their claims about the ways in which the Kress donations had influenced museums. These claims are addressed in the following four sections: **Legitimacy and Credibility**; **Space, Seeding Collections, Staffing**; **Exhibitions and Publications**; and **Research and Curriculum**. The report addresses a few challenges associated with the Kress Collections and concludes with thoughts on possible effects of the distribution of these works on the “American people.”

*In 1961, we got the Kress paintings and at that point they said, “This is going to be a museum now.”*

MU Museum of Art and Archaeology

## Legitimacy and Credibility

Receiving the Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque paintings, sculptures, and other objects from the Kress Collection served to bestow *legitimacy* on some of the museums in the sense that the works contributed to the very formation of the campus museum. The largest collection of sixty-four pieces was donated to the University of Arizona Museum of Art (UAMA). Virtually everyone I talked with at the UAMA was not only enthusiastic about the works, but also aware they were from the Kress Foundation. In fact, the history of the museum was perceived to be “all about Kress” as respondents told me:

*Sam Kress’s brother [Rush] spent time out here. He became friends with... the president of the university at the time. This was in the early 50s. Somehow a deal was struck that the Kress Foundation would loan sixty pieces to the university for exhibition... and it was so popular that the president asked the question, what would it take to keep it here and they said, “if you build a proper museum, I think we can work something out...” So this building was built to house that collection and to secure it. So it is fundamental to the existence of the museum.<sup>5</sup>*

The museum houses the works beautifully, with one room devoted to twenty-six panels that once hung in the Cathedral of Ciudad Rodrigo, and are referred to as the Retablo or altarpiece. As docents there like to tell people, Christopher Columbus might have prayed before these same panels before his voyage to the Americas. A second large room holds the rest of the collection.

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4. Over 60% of the respondents were not museum personnel, however, with little to potentially gain other than possibly increased status for their campus art museum.

5. Ellipses (...) indicate that words have been edited from the transcripts for the sake of space. Care has been taken not to change the meaning of transcribed responses.



Similarly to UAMA, the gift from the Kress Foundation helped establish the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri, as relayed by museum personnel:

*It [the Kress gift] made us who we are. The museum was founded in 1957. There's a deeper history to it. Originally it was created in the nineteenth century and it was a comparative collection of casts and archaeological material and was originally called the Collection of Classical Archaeology. It sort of vanished in the Depression, along with the department upstairs, and then was re-founded in the 1950s... In 1961 when the Kress Collection was given to the museum, it transformed us into an art museum. Instead of being relatively narrowly focused on antiquities, especially on antiquities of Greece and Rome, we became an art museum that had a much broader charge and oddly enough at precisely that moment, the museum began acquiring works... It really expanded the mission in a fundamental way. The same folks were at the helm, it's not as though there was a change of leadership or anything else, but it expanded the horizons of the museum in a profound way and really was transformational.*



Figure 1.3. *Athena Scorning the Advances of Hephaestus*, Paris Bordone, c.1555-1560, Samuel H. Kress Collection, Museum of Art and Archaeology 61.78, University of Missouri

Of the seven study museums, the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago was the most recently formed museum, established in 1974, the same year it received twenty-two objects from the Kress Foundation. That the fledging museum received such an important gift in its first year of operation added to its sense of worth and substance, as described by an interviewee:

*What I know of the early days of the museum, of the days when the collection first came here, [the Kress gift] was profoundly important because this museum opened in 1974 and that's late for a great research university to embrace the notion of having an art museum... and the university still wasn't really committed to the arts. Having material of the quality and importance as that in the Kress Collection, to have an area where we had really something, added*

*immeasurably to opportunities for this museum to be credible and to be taken seriously as a place that could provide a different kind of learning, a different kind of teaching experience than the classroom could.*

The Kress gifts, thus, led the way for the creation of some campus art museums. For others, they provided a sense of legitimacy and credibility. The Kress Collections contribute to a perception of the campus art museums in this study as *serious* art museums with paintings and other objects of worth. For example, a professor at the University of Arizona, talked about how the Kress donation “added to the prestige of the museum.... [People] give credence to this because of the quality of the collection.”

## Space, Seeding Collections, Staffing

Each of the art museums in the study received gifts of between ten and sixty-four Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque works of art, many of them Italian old masters. With such important items in their collections, museum personnel found themselves focusing on the physical space for display, the desire to obtain more works and create a collections specialty in European Renaissance, and the need to have a Medieval/Renaissance expert as part of the museum team or in the art history department.

### Space

Having enough space for permanent display of the Kress works is a concern at some institutions, but then, all of the museums wish they had more space in general. Most museums, nonetheless, have all or almost all of the Kress donations on permanent display. A curator at the Smart, the museum with the smallest space for galleries, noted, “for a long time when I worked here there was no place to have a permanent exhibition of the Kress material. And now we do. In a way, it’s as though the Kress works are new again.” The museums at the Universities of Arizona, Kansas, and Missouri, and at Oberlin College have created gallery space where almost all, if not all, of their Kress gifts are displayed. Indiana University has most of its Kress works displayed, but museum staff lament that they don’t have the space to display them all at the same time. The Snite, feeling the pinch of insufficient space, has eight of its seventeen Kress objects on permanent display.

### Seeding Collections

Gallery space is needed not only for the Kress donations, but also to hold other early European works sought by the museums as a result of receiving the Kress art, as demonstrated in this quotation:

*I’m sure that the presence of these Kress paintings really pushed the way the museum tended to acquire because they saw a variety of subject matter or pictures from that period and if something came along on the market or if*

*a donor had something, they'd say "that really works well with this group of Kress paintings we have." (AMAM)*



Figure 1.4. *Bathing Girl*, Joseph-Charles Marin, French, 1788; unglazed modeled earthenware; 7.75 in. (19.7 cm); Samuel H. Kress Collection, David and Alfred Smart Museum, University of Chicago

Across the country, the Kress gift is seen as responsible for museums receiving further donations. “When someone gives a good collection, that encourages other donors to give,” noted a curators the Spencer and the MU Museum of Art and Archaeology said, “I think the Kress Foundation really just spurred all sorts of donations. You can see that in the accession numbers” (which typically record the date of acquisition). The often-used metaphor is that the Kress works “seeded” collections: “The Kress Collection helped to build our collection. It was a good body of art to *seed* the collection here” (IUAM).

Interviewees describe the function of their Kress Collections in similar ways. Not only did it serve to “seed” the collections, but it currently works as the “core” of the Renaissance and Baroque holdings, or to “anchor” the museum in the Renaissance and the Baroque, or even as the museum’s “warhorses” that can be used in various ways:

*Some of the Kress pieces became our warhorses. They were so rich, they were used in many different projects.... It's wonderful to have not just paintings, but to have the small sculptures, the glasswork, it's a wonderful variety. Even for faculty members that aren't as at home with the history of art, they can find a more material cultural approach to these works. (Smart)*

## Staffing

Because the Kress works of art created a major focus in the museums on Western European Renaissance and Baroque, at least one of the institutions felt moved to hire someone with expertise in this area:

*The Kress gift came in 1961 and it was shortly after that in the late 60s that [art history faculty member] was hired. Now he's not specifically Renaissance, he's Baroque but... the existence of the Kress Collection really pushed for someone who knew about Renaissance art... someone who could be teaching in that area. (AMAM)*

In another case, the Kress Collection helped attract a young curator: “I interviewed here and it was another one of these collections that nobody really knows as much about and I loved the fact that it had a Kress Collection in it. That was a factor in my decision to come here....” (MU Museum of Art and Archaeology)

## Exhibitions and Publications

Although the Spencer has plans to reorganize its galleries into thematic exhibitions, all the museums currently exhibit the Kress works in galleries arranged by geography (European) and chronology (Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque). With over sixty pieces donated from the Kress Foundation to the UAMA, one might expect that gallery would be impressive. It is outstanding.

Figure 1.5. Altarpiece from Ciudad Rodrigo, Fernando Gallego and Workshop, c.1480-1488, Samuel H. Kress Collection, University of Arizona Museum of Art, University of Arizona



The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes upon my first visit to the gallery:

*Upon entering the nondescript and somewhat difficult to find building where the UAMA is housed, I walked up the stairs and saw to my right a wide doorway with the words above it, in gold: The Samuel H. Kress Collection, The Altarpiece from Ciudad Rodrigo. The lighting and color of the steel blue room makes the twenty-six large paintings virtually glow. They are panels from the altarpiece of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Ascension in Rodrigo, Spain. The space feels sacred and people's voices lower to whispers as they enter, stop, and turn their heads in every direction. In other galleries, visitors tend to enter and then immediately go from one painting to the next, reading the labels, and studying the work. Here, they come in and stop, their eyes spanning the walls of the room, taking it all in, as one would do upon entering a church or great architectural space. Only then, do they go from one panel to the next. (fieldnotes, 2011)*

In addition to the panels in the room for the Retablo, another room houses more paintings and objects from the Kress donation. Professors, docents, and students express amazement that the works are in their campus art museum: "It's astounding to think that this Retablo, twenty-six panels... is in Tucson, Arizona." With sixty-four Kress objects and the Kress name prominently displayed, virtually everyone at the University of Arizona who is aware of the museum is aware of the Kress donations and appreciates them as described by a student:

*What's great about the Kress Collection is that when you walk into that space and you see the religious art and the figures, it's just, you feel like, oh, like wow, this is very beautiful... even though I'm not religious, I still appreciate it. My favorite thing... is Friday afternoons, they have guitar playing and that is amazing.... They have chairs in the Kress Gallery and everyone sits in it, there*



*are so many people sometimes that they're standing, and the guitarists play and it's really amazing with the backdrop of the Kress Collection.*

Through serendipity and a curator open to recognizing it, the UAMA has “didactic labels on the entire Kress Collection.” As the curator described,

*We just got so lucky. A woman literally walked in the door who is Russian... very, very deep knowledge and her favorite area is Renaissance. So she walks in the door, she's here for two years, she's looking for something to do because her husband is an astrophysicist and was hired by the university to do that kind of research. So, I said to her, “Hey, do you want to hang out and do the labels for the Kress?” And she can read five languages, so she could really research things and she has this great knack of finding the little tidbit of history that makes it fun for people to read. You know, she'll tell you about an artist and then tell you that he died of the plague. She actually wrote 90%—all I had to do was edit and put it in sort of American English.... It's wonderful... Now there's almost nothing that doesn't have didactic labels.*

The colleges and universities with fewer Kress works cannot make the same sort of statement that the UAMA does, but they also are making valuable use of their collections. In 2012-13, the Yale University Art Gallery is lending many of its works in storage to museums at six colleges and universities, including Oberlin.<sup>6</sup> Each museum will take a different focus. The AMAM has chosen “Renaissance Art” and will be receiving thirty-six to thirty-eight additional works from Yale to augment the gifts from Kress and other related works in its collection. AMAM plans are being made in conjunction with art historians at Oberlin and professors in other disciplines such as a musicologist with expertise in Renaissance music. The musicologist is “already planning to have a concert with his students based upon the music on the manuscripts in our collection and kind of re-creating some of the musical pieces for which we have fragments” (AMAM).

All the campus art museums lend Kress Collection pieces, at times, to other places on campus or to other institutions for exhibition. An IUAM respondent described being the courier for an altar panel, and accompanying it to England for an exhibit in London where “it made me proud to be there to represent it.” The Kress gift to the Spencer includes *Portrait of Mrs. Daniel Sargent Curtis* (1882) by John Singer Sargent. According to a curator, “We couldn't lend it to everyone at the same time. That has been one of the most frequent requests for loans.” While the AMAM was closed for renovations, it had a busy exhibition schedule in other cities, including *Side by Side: Oberlin's Masterworks at the Met* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC) where Pier Francesco Mola's *Mercury Putting Argus to Sleep* from the Kress Collection was displayed. The art museums find that other institutions often request items from their Kress Collection.

Staff at several of the museums talked also about how the Kress Collections are often represented in exhibitions and catalogs because “they lend themselves to a wide variety of thematic perspectives and that enriches how we understand



Figure 1.6. *Portrait of Mrs. Daniel Curtis*, John Singer Sargent, Samuel H. Kress Collection, Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas (1960.0059)

6. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funds this collection-sharing program. (Yale University Art Gallery Collection-Sharing Initiative, 2010)

them” (Smart). Kress Collections also have been the focus of museum publications. For example, *The Register of the Spencer Museum of Art* (1991) contains papers given as part of a symposium in 1990 to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the Kress donation, and the MU Museum of Art and Archaeology made their Kress Collection the subject of a catalogue published in 1999 titled *The Samuel H. Kress Study Collection at the University of Missouri*.

## Research and Curriculum

Similarly to the multiple thematic possibilities for exhibitions and publications, curators, faculty, and students talk about multiple ways in which they or others used the works in research projects, whether in fulfilling a class assignment or as part of a thesis or dissertation. Foci include on-going research in the area of conservation (IUAM staff); doctoral research about the *Allegory of the Four Continents* (Indiana University student); masters research into matters of style expressed in the tradition of the annunciation to the Virgin (Notre Dame student); and iconography as described by this recent alum who grew up in Oberlin and visited the AMAM through grade school programs:

*I had explicit experience [with Kress works] in the docent program and in an art history Renaissance class called “Love, Lust, and Desire in Renaissance Art.” We were assigned to pick a piece and write an iconographic paper on the piece. I chose a Kress piece, “Madonna del Suffragio.” It was a great assignment and I really got interested in the work. The Renaissance art class used the museum a lot. Every Friday, we’d go to the museum. We visited, did papers, talked about what we saw. It was great to go into depth. And, the altarpiece is one of my favorites. I’ve known it since I was a child.*

She is now preparing to go to graduate school in art history.

The UAMA, in collaboration with the Meadows Museum at Southern Methodist University in Dallas and the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, undertook extensive research into their Altarpiece from Ciudad Rodrigo. Using x-ray, infrared reflectography, and ultraviolet light, they uncovered the preparatory drawings of the works hidden beneath layers of paint, and thereby determined that the works were created by two master artists, Fernando Gallego and Master Bartolomé and their workshops. The research project, which took five years to complete, resulted in an award-winning book and a documentary that runs continuously in the foyer outside the entrance to the Retablo.

Research use blends into curricular use of the Kress works. Interviewees talked about ways in which the Kress objects are used in art history classes, in other disciplines at the college or university, and in K-12 programs. Each is discussed in the sections to follow.



Figure 1.7. *Madonna del Suffragio*, unknown artist, c.1520, Samuel H. Kress Collection, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College

## Art History and other Art Curricula

The Kress Collections have been used over time in classes at these museums, probably most frequently in art history classes, as several alumnae reflected:

*I used [Kress works] as an undergraduate. I wrote a paper on one of the pieces.*

*When I was a student here, I remember a Kress piece I used in a discussion group. I returned and thought, I remember those pieces. These pieces are at the core of the museum selections.*

A graduate intern (IUAM) reported that in an art history course, the class spent a lot of time with the museum's collections, including the Kress works, and doing so led her to pursue a masters degree in Medieval art. A paper on one of the Kress works while pursuing her masters then became the starting point for her doctoral work. She commented, "It's critical to be able to relate your work to what you can actually see."

An art history professor at the University of Kansas uses the Kress works all the time in her classes:

*If students take more than one class with me, they've probably written on the Kress pictures at least twice if not up to four or five times.... I will assign them works in our collection, not necessarily Kress but for the earlier classes, they are mostly Kress objects.... At the end of the semester, I'll take my classes into the gallery, and usually my classes are too big to do everybody at the same time so I have to split them into two groups... and we wind up with that.*

Another professor at the University of Kansas makes use of the Kress Collection in his print-making class:

*I ask students to go through the museum and look for kinds of multiples—thinking about prints as multiples... and the Kress Collection and all the early collections have so many examples of things that could be understood as multiples whether they are casts or whether they are using stamps or tools for the gold passages or whatever so there is a lot of usage of tools and techniques that smack of manufacturing and multiples.*

At the University of Missouri, an art history professor said that the Kress Collection allows her to "talk about what a northern Renaissance painting looks like as opposed to Italian Renaissance painting because those differences are not just style but in the way they deal with the materials. And you just can't really get that across in slides or digital images." In various ways, therefore, the works are appreciated and integrated into studio art and art history classes.

Students of art history talked about the ways in which the Kress Collections helped prepare them for study abroad programs in Italy and contributed to a greater appreciation of art in Italy. For some students, perhaps those not in art history, it was only after being abroad that they realized the significance of the

works in the campus museum as described by a professor at the University of Missouri:

*With students and my own kids—having been in Italy—they come into that room, that middle room and all of a sudden it's just the gasps. "Wow! I've just seen this stuff in Italy." We get students who have been studying abroad and there's just this recognition and feeling that we're not so far removed. We've got some of that stuff right here. And those are the kids who then end up having a better relationship long-term with the museum, I think, because they can connect it to all those great experiences. It's really meaningful.*

## Non-Art Curricula

Although students and professors in art history and studio art appear to be those who interact consistently with the Kress Collections, professors and students in other disciplines also make use of the collections. Curators often include Kress works in class sessions they set up for professors, as exemplified by a curator at IUAM who created a class titled “*What do you think of immaculate conception?*” for a religious studies professor. A curator at the AMAM, noting that the Kress paintings are at the core of their Italian Renaissance and Baroque holdings, stated that they “outreach to art history and the Conservatory and then we want to involve other departments such as religion and history and even economics.... A beautiful portable altarpiece... has been used to look at trade routes.”

At the University of Arizona, an area studies professor incorporates Kress works into an essay option for his students. A history professor there is planning to use the Retablo in his Mexican history class:

*I want to focus on popular religion in Mexico, I mean the way popular religion has developed so this is going to be fabulous... I just read an article about the catechism written by Padre Ripalda. He wrote it right around the time of the Council of Trent. It was translated into Italian, then translated into Spanish and this catechism remained the basic catechism in Mexico and most of the rest of Latin America from that time until about 1940... I want to know things from this catechism that are reflected visually and this [museum] is one of the places where they will find them. Along with that, the author of this article... talks about how people in Mexico grew up learning this catechism and if they read anything else, it was not the Bible because that was discouraged..., so if they read anything else or knew anything else about Biblical ideas it came from Dante's Inferno, very early translated into Spanish and circulated in Mexico. For my seminar this coming Monday, we are going to discuss the article, we are going to discuss the catechism of Padre Ripalda, and they also have to read Dante's Inferno.... And then we will have this chance to look and see things.... And it makes it more striking and memorable to be able to use the Kress Collection and have them go up and look for what they've just read about.*

Kress works have been used as inspiration for dance movements, as noted by a curator at the Spencer: “We’ve had people do dance gesture projects that related to



those paintings.... They are a kind of mainstay for what we are and who we are and it's wonderful to have that kind of *anchor*." Even a business class at the University of Kansas makes use of the Kress Collection to focus on charitable giving in a tax class. As a museum director noted, "the use of the Kress works is about finding the links." Many of these museums have done so.

## K-12 Curricula



Figure 1.8. *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, Matteo Di Giovanni, c.1490-1495, Samuel H. Kress Collection, Indiana University Art Museum, Indiana University

"One of the benefits of the Kress Collection is that it is a good starting point [for tours] because it's always up," stated an education director when describing the ways in which she works with docents to use Kress paintings and sculptures in school and other tours. Across the museums, the education curators and docents have made creative links to integrate Kress works into the K-12 curriculum. They talk about the "narrative nature" of the works, how they are "juicy," and how their "accessibility" makes them good pieces to use with children:

*Some are juicy, luscious rich paintings that are rich for narrative descriptions and they are accessible for younger audiences. There are a number of them that get folded into docent-led tours. (Smart)*

*The Kress Collection is very narrative in nature. The ones that are here are juicy topics—really interesting and meaty. We sometimes use them as a jumping off place for creative writing and story telling. (IUAM)*

In addition to using the pieces as a starting place for story telling or writing, they are used to compare perspectives over time and sometimes across cultures, whether looking at "how Judith morphs over the century" or how the Madonna is represented at different times and in different cultures, as done at the IUAM. At the UAMA, docents find that the research that has been done on the Kress collection and the compelling display make it easy and interesting for them to talk with K-12 students about how the master and apprenticeship programs worked, and to notice "how the style of painting changes by looking at people's feet and their hands." They talk about what materials were used to produce different colors, among many other things:

*Most of our other collection goes in and out of the vault for varying reasons, the Kress stuff is pretty much up and it's a good starting point for people.... We don't teach Bible stories here. What we do is talk about the history of the time period. So it's 1490s in Spain, Columbus discovered America, and the Retablo was hung. The paintings were done with oils which was kind of novel, so we can talk about the kinds of workshops and the kinds of people that worked in the workshops and the kinds of minerals they used. We can talk about the political climate where the Moors were being kicked out and the Jews were being kicked out and if they stayed, they were killed. We can talk about the geographical location of this particular church, and how it was on the way to Portugal so it was your last time to convert or your first time if entering Spain.... We can talk about the elements of art, about linear perspective, the flatness,*

*the symbolism of different animals.... We can talk about it from many many different ways and that's what we do. The Retablo room is probably the jewel of the collection, but there are several examples of classical art that relates to mythology and why would they be painting that sort of thing at the opening of the Renaissance? Well, because people still believed in mythology then. It was something that was hanging around for a long time.*

In general, the Kress Collections are described as “compelling pieces,” “exciting to use,” and as “a core part of our curriculum from elementary children on up.”<sup>7</sup>

## Challenges and Possibilities

*“We do have people who call and say, we don't want to see any nudity.”*

(Education Curator)

What might be some of the challenges associated with having received the Kress donations? That many of the campus art museums with Kress gifts are located in rural or smaller cities in regions where more conservative values prevail may contribute to occasional complaints or comments on nudity, but this applies to more recent art as well. One problem is having space to do them justice, but all the museums have worked to create space so that most of their Kress works can be on permanent display. Sufficient funds for conservation of the collection is sometimes a need as one curator described:

*There's another painting, one of the Kress paintings I'm very keen to have conserved. It's a painting by Giampietrino. It's probably the closest thing we have and ever will have... to Leonardo. He was in Leonardo's studio. It is a beautiful painting of Cleopatra clasping the asp to her breast. It's absolutely stunning. It needs a lot of conservation.... but it's clear to me and the conservators that it's going to be stunning when it's done.<sup>8</sup>*

Simply accepting the Kress donation caused philosophical debates at the University of Chicago in the early 1970s when a contemporary artist who was also a collector argued that the Smart Museum needed to focus on the present and the future rather than the past:

*When [the Kress] collection was offered to the museum, ...a great figure in the development of interest in contemporary art of the period... felt the Smart's job was to be about modern and contemporary art. She had made a couple of modest donations, and she had quite a nice art collection of her own. She said if you take that Kress collection I'm walking. And she did. They made the choice to accept the Kress gift rather than to hold out hope that they were going to get her very fine modern and contemporary things.*



Figure 1.9. *Cleopatra*, Giampietrino, c.1515, Samuel H. Kress Collection, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College

7. For an example of a classroom resource sheet based on Neri di Bicci's *Altar Wing with Five Saints* from the Kress Collection at Oberlin, see [http://www.oberlin.edu/amam/documents/2\\_diBicci\\_AltarWingWithFiveSaints.pdf](http://www.oberlin.edu/amam/documents/2_diBicci_AltarWingWithFiveSaints.pdf).

8. This museum has meanwhile received a grant from the Kress Foundation to help in conserving the piece.

The respondent situated this struggle historically:

*There was still a battle in Chicago. The Art Institute for a long time did not show an interest in contemporary art and many of the collectors who were interested wound up banding together to form the Museum of Contemporary Art. It's now just gone past its 40th birthday so it was founded barely just before this museum was open. A lot of those people said, "well we can see we aren't making any headway with the Art Institute," so there was this sense of struggle.*

Much of the southern European art from the Medieval and Renaissance periods is religious in nature. A few noted that this could be "tricky" in terms of using the works for educational purposes, but in general, professors, curators, and docents employed the works in ways that explored their historical and socio-political contexts. That is, most of the people with whom I talked tended to see the works as important in non-religious ways, as portrayed by a University of Arizona student:

*When I first came to this art museum, I was really little, and I went to the Retablo and I hadn't realize it was religious or anything, I just thought "wow, this great story was preserved and passed through the ages," and, yeah, I was really impressed by that.*

I began to note, therefore, when people found the religious nature of the works meaningful in itself. Several curators talked about how the paintings allowed them to make strong connections with religious studies programs. The MU Museum of Art and Archaeology projects slides of the religious works at Christmas time while students from the school of music perform Handel's Messiah. Several interviewees revealed more personal connections. A professor in Arizona told about being asked by her grandson to be his confirmation sponsor:

*I said, "I know where we can come and look to talk about some of this," because he was supposed to be studying scripture and things and he's busy doing soccer and basketball and every other thing.... And so, we came and looked at some of these church pieces [in the Kress Gallery].*

A couple students described being moved spiritually. They each felt captured by a particular object as this student described:

*When I came here in 8th grade, I had a very religious experience in front of one of the pieces and decided that I was going to be a nun which obviously didn't come about, but it just blew me away. It was the crucifix that's on the far north wall. And it hung, well, I was shorter then, but it was above me and the lighting coming down on it, you could see the piece really clearly and all of the details on it and even the parts that looked really weathered or damaged looked like they were supposed to be that way, I mean just like human bodies sustain that kind of damage just existing, and then the shadow behind it.*

*That's what really struck me. It was like it could have been gone in an instant... It was like the shadow is what is left on this world of Jesus' presence and it was like the sculpture is the divine.... I'm almost as far away from that as I could possibly be, but I still go and look at it once in a while and realize that to the people who saw it when it was made, it probably would have had a similar effect on them. It's really beautiful.*

All in all, few challenges were associated with receiving Kress Collections; conservation being the area that will continue to need attention. Respondents more readily discussed ways in which the Kress donations contributed to their museum and college or university. One recommendation was for the Kress Foundation to initiate a program in which the collections moved around, or were exchanged among recipient museums, to further access to these works.

## **“Effect on the American People, Outside the Great Centres”**

Return to the challenge posed in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1962 regarding the *Great Kress Giveaway*: “It is a pity that no real attempt is made... to assess the effect on the American people, outside the great centres, of this revolutionary experiment...” (279). Although this study has looked at fewer than a fifth of the campus and community art museums that received objects from the Kress Foundation fifty years ago, we have learned some of the ways in which their “Bellotto, their Paris Bordone, their Magnasco, or their Salviati portrait” has affected people in the more rural heartland of America.

First, the gift was responsible for the very establishment of some campus art museums and brought more credibility to others. Second, as a result of receiving the Kress gift, the museums found it easier to acquire other significant donations, often complementing the Kress works and enriching the museum’s collection in European Medieval to Baroque art. This important collection then called for curators and art history professors knowledgeable about the art and led, sometimes, to the establishment of a new position at the institution. The collection also demanded space for permanent exhibition and some museums initiated renovations or expansions in gallery space so that most of the pieces could be on permanent display. The collection is heavily used by art historians in their classes and in their students’ research. That the colleges and universities have these collections is a draw for faculty and students in art history. As an administrator in Kansas stated, “The fact that they had this gift is significant for the state. Lots of people might say, ‘You want to be in art history, why Kansas?’ I think having this comprehensive museum and having these works as part of the collection... is wildly significant.” In addition, faculty and students in other disciplines use the Kress Collections. A music student at Oberlin selects a particular painting and composes a piece to accompany it. A business professor in Kansas uses the Kress collection in a tax class focusing on tax laws and charitable giving. The Kress works as a whole have become a mainstay of tours and educational programs with K-12 students



and with the public in general. Reproductions often find their way into catalogues published by the museums. As a result, the Kress collections contribute not only to knowledge, but also to the pride faculty, students, and museum staff have in their campus art museums and consequently, in their institutions.

At these seven museums alone, hundreds of thousands of grade school students, community members, and college or university students and faculty visit the galleries where Kress collections are hung. From Ohio to Arizona, people talk about how the Kress gift provides access to art of a high caliber in areas where such access is limited, as in the following quotations:

*They [the Kress objects] established a really important presence for early European art in museums around the country and in places where students and children and everyone might not have any access to art of that caliber. It really has helped, and people on the coasts don't know this, but since I'm from New York City and I now live in the Midwest, I see the contrast. What it has allowed is universities in the Midwest and the South and other parts of the country and the public which they serve, the local communities, to have a whole other dimension. It means that we have a caliber of international art, really important European art, always on display that people would have to travel 1200 miles otherwise to see. It's allowed a kind of regional development across the country and it's given a dimension to those campuses that would not have existed if the Kress Foundation had not given those collections. (Kansas)*

*Works from the Renaissance or the Baroque period have an impact here in middle Missouri that works by anybody else simply don't have.... That's what people think of when they think of art. They are the iconic works in people's imaginations. (Missouri)*

This access is significant. It is not only the opportunity to view a Bellotto or Salviati, but also the access to knowledge across cultures and time that can come with learning about the works, how they were made, for whom, and why. It is access to the creative imagination engendered when realizing you are surrounded by paintings which Christopher Columbus might possibly have stood before. It is physical access to the works so you can copy from the masters as their apprentices did centuries before or so you can develop a passion for art appreciation. And, it is access to inspiration that you too could possibly create in some way. As a curator at the UAMA stated, "People are astonished, people are absolutely blown away by the Kress Collection."

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